Misadventures in the Interdimensional Scrapyard

By L. Alves
Edited by Aristide Twain & Ostara Gale

PUBLISHED BY THE CHESHIRE HOUSE

Copyright © L. Alves 2024

All rights reserved.

This story is a work of fiction. Any similarity to other narratives or stories is done entirely within the bounds of parody and/or satire. Beyond the targets thereof, any resemblance to persons living or dead, or events past or present, is co-incidental.

The right of L. Alves to be identified as the author of this work is asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Caradans, the Cradle of the Lesser, the Detraxxi, the Great Multiversal Cyborg War, the Orbulous, Queen of the Black Market, Harvox Von Krumm © L. Alves
Abraytha Janus Colefia & associated concepts © Ostara Gale

The character of Neeta was created by M. Lee Lunsford and is available for use by anyone with no citation required. This citation has been provided as a historical note and for the benefit of any readers who may be unfamiliar with the character.

The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving this character, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed.

First day. Tara Moore is alone. Her Void Ship is ruined, beached on rubble-covered ground — her crew lie dead inside — and her leg is thoroughly broken. There is no sky. She looks across the vast and tangled tracts of detritus which conceal the ground in every direction, and she begins to search for the demat unit which may be her salvation, a rusted old pipe held as a crutch by her side.

Fifteenth day. Tara Moore is alone. Once in a great while, plumes of smoke billow from the gaps between twisted metal, bespeaking some hidden mechanical operation, or a volcano buried far beneath her feet. Or neither. This is not her universe, Tara reminds herself. Nothing here need follow her laws. She has not found any demat units. She has not found anything recognisable.

Twenty-fourth day. Tara Moore is alone. Once, she saw a shape blur past in her peripheral vision, seeming to dart along the crest of a mountain of scrap. There was nothing there when she turned. Her month's-worth of emergency rations are running out. Her leg is healing, but not well.

Thirty-sixth day. Tara Moore is alone. As a child, she once followed a blackbird to a blackberry bush in the woods beside her house. There are no blackbirds here, and no blackberries, but she has found a berry-bush all the same, growing around old furniture and broken vases from a tiny plastic pot at its base. There is an alcove, made from haphazardly-piled vehicles, and clean water trickles down through a crack in a great fallen water-tower. She can catch it in her hands before it hits the rubble below and runs away down the cracks. For a moment, it seems like paradise.

Forty-ninth day. Tara Moore is alone. There are no demat units here. She has lost the ship anyway. The water-tower is vast, and trickles slowly. If the berry-bush lives on, she realises — and certainly there is no winter to stop it — she could manage to stay here, beneath the shelter of rusted automobiles, for the rest of her natural life. She begins to cry.

Another day. Tara Moore is alone. She has turned to art. A scavenged blaster makes for a fine welding-torch, burning piles of well-chosen scrap into sprawling sculptures. Berries which are too ripe to eat are repurposed as

pigment. All of her paintings are red. All of her sculptures are grey. She dreams of home.

A further day. Tara Moore is alone. There have been noises at night. There is no wind here, but something is moving the metal. The berry-bush has vanished, pot and all. She focuses on her sculptures, ignoring her hunger.

The next day. Tara Moore is alone. She is woken by a sound from close nearby. Standing, she is met by a berry-red eye. Tendrils lash out with a mechanical shriek, and she feels their tips sinking into her flesh. Pain, pain, pain, then darkness. Then light.

Tara Moore is not alone.

* * *

Having lived one's life in a world and a culture as still and as stagnant as the dead of winter made one susceptible to quick thaws — at the first touch of sunlight, the first sign of something new and strange and exhilarating, someone who had known nothing in their life but endless inertia and fields of blinding white was liable to get swept away by the snowmelt and find themselves further in over their head than they were quite prepared for.

Xiantio knew this well enough. She wasn't foolish — inexperienced, perhaps, but only that. She knew that Abraytha Janus Colefia, the Unbound Scavenger who travelled the worlds of the Multiverse in the void ship *Katioka*, had fallen into her life like a rock onto the surface of a frozen pond, and that, if she didn't tread carefully around the cracks, it wouldn't *just* be her once-unchanging perspective that got shattered. Abraytha was wild, and free, and absolutely *unbound* by the structures which had governed her home, and she knew that that could be as dangerous as it was exhilarating.

But for all of that, she *trusted* Abraytha. The decision to trust him implicitly was one which she had *had* to make when she'd decided to go away with him in *Katioka*, and thus far, it had been a sound one. He could be reckless, certainly, and prideful, yes — but above all, he was her *friend*. He had taken her away with him to see the Multiverse — to see the wonders that lay beyond her home — and, more than that, he had been kinder to her, in the short time they'd known each other, than anyone she'd ever known. She knew

it could be dangerous, to be swept away into a world beyond any of her imaginings. But with Abraytha, she felt she could put aside any lingering fears she may have otherwise had, and enjoy the adventure to her fullest.

Because it *did* take trust. The fact that she could see, now, how limited a world it had been didn't mean that Xiantio didn't miss her home, or wonder if she might have been wrong to leave it so suddenly. The possibility of experiencing the endless infinity of existence outside of the Frostbiter's Crib was enough to ensure that she certainly didn't *regret* it, but at heart, she needed the certainty that her life as a wanderer in infinite dimensions would be *better* than the one which she had left behind, if she was to fully embrace her decision. And Abraytha provided that certainty.

All of which was why, when Abraytha occasionally let his more acquisitional instincts show — that was, when he lived up to his self-given title and put their sightseeing travels on hold to acquire a new item for his collection of objects from across the Multiverse — Xiantio allowed herself to be certain that, even on these more dangerous scavenging excursions, she would not come to any harm. Yes, she enjoyed the journeys more than the resulting artefacts themselves, while she wasn't always certain that Abraytha felt the same way — but she was more than willing to indulge his passion for collecting, just as he was willing to indulge her desire for adventure.

The collection, Abraytha had explained, had been gathered from thousands of worlds, and was his absolute pride and joy — after *Katioka*, he'd hastily added, in a tone that suggested he was worried that the ship might take offence. And it *was* impressive, even if Xiantio privately suspected that *hundreds* of worlds might have been a less hyperbolic estimation. Odds and ends and knickknacks from across the Multiverse, the collection of which — alongside the occasional rollicking adventure — was Abraytha's primary goal in his interdimensional travels. They filled the rooms of *Katioka*, arranged with a curator's care despite their sprawling nature — magic powders from various Lands of Oz, books from dozens of infinite libraries, bits of technology from all manner of dystopias, utopias, and possible future timelines — there was even something which Abraytha had proudly pointed out as 'the *actual* table from the High Tower of the Consistency Palatium'.

It was, in fact, that very collection which Xiantio had been idly examining when Abraytha called her to the deck one day to announce, with a wide grin, that they were heading to a place which he had always wanted to visit.

"The Interdimensional Scrapyard!" he exclaimed, spinning the ship's wheel as he brought *Katioka* in to land through the dimensional boundaries. "I could never manage to find the coordinates! Trade secrets, you know how it goes. Ah, but the *Shifter* knew them. Of course *she* did. And given that *Katioka* has always been a bit psychic when it comes to her passengers — well, now *she* does, too!"

"Scrapyard?" Xiantio asked, twitching her ears with confusion. "We're going to a scrapyard? I thought you said —"

"A world beyond your wildest dreams!" Abraytha repeated, heedless of her uncertain tone. "*Exactly!* Just *imagine* the artefacts we might find there — the forgotten oddments lying among the scrap, just waiting to be salvaged!"

Xiantio nodded vaguely. A scrapyard did not sound particularly interesting, to her sensibilities — but then, given her life before, she'd found that just about *anything* new *could* be fascinating, looked at from the right perspective. And she was willing enough to give it a try.

The view as they descended, however, did not give her much hope. The landscape of rusted scrap seemed to stretch on and on forever, in every direction — twisted metal and broken glass and hundreds upon hundreds of discarded objects, stacked high all the way to the distant horizon, the monotony only broken by the uneven heights of the towering piles, and by the plume of thick smog that billowed forth from behind a nearby mound, coating *Katioka* in soot as it descended. As Xiantio shielded her face from the acrid smoke, the pillar lessened and died away, leaving the vast world in unsettling silence.

With a hard tug on the wheel, Abraytha brought the ship in to land, sending it jolting with a bump and a scrape as it settled onto a rough patch of ground — then rushed to the railing, peering down at the landscape with clear joy written across his face.

"Look at all of *this!*" he called, spinning on his heels as he took in the scrapyard. "Oh, I could get lost here *forever!*"

Xiantio bit her lip with concern, looking again at the unending wastes. She didn't doubt that he could, and the thought worried her. Oh, the scrapyard was certainly fascinating, in its way. But that didn't mean that she *liked* it. The strangling smoke and twisted scrap seemed a far cry from the natural serenity of her home in a way that really *wasn't* very enticing, for a change — but there was a familiarity about this place, all the same. A feeling of inertia, of stagnation, of endless doldrums. Somehow, this didn't feel like a world of adventure. It felt like a world where lost things came to lie still forever.

"Well, what are we waiting for, Xi?" Abraytha exclaimed. "I wouldn't be surprised if I found some great new additions to *Katioka* just — just *lying around!*"

"Um —" Xiantio replied. "Well — I don't know. This place kind of… gives me the creeps. Are you sure it's safe?"

"Oh, of course it's safe! We'll be fine!" Abraytha exclaimed.

Xiantio nodded. Making up her mind to put her doubts aside, she added, in her most cheerful voice.

"Alright! Then I'm game."

She paused, then further added:

"But – can we stay within sight of the ship? I'd — I'd just hate to get lost in all of *that*."

Abraytha coughed, somewhat awkwardly, then seemed to hesitate before replying.

"Ah — yes! Yes, of course we can. Why not?"

With a nod, and casting her worries aside, Xiantio took his waiting hand, and they leapt down into the scrapyard.

* * *

Friendship, for Abraytha, was never something which had come easily; too many potential candidates of ages past had made it all too clear to him that they did not care for *him* as much as he did *them* — that they found fault in his character, in his headlong dives into adventure, and in the life to which he had dedicated himself.

Abraytha Janus Colefia, graduate of the University of Alarnakara and general-purposes daring adventurer, son of the esteemed Yophese Colefia, did not deny that he was given to a certain level of warranted self-esteem, and there were certain insults which his honour simply could not bear.

He had cared deeply for Xiantio since the very moment they met, and in Xiantio, it seemed that he had, at long last, found someone who truly cared for him in turn. Xiantio was his friend — his *best* friend, after *Katioka*. And he was certain that *this* friendship was, at last, fully mutual.

It was thus with some guilt tempering his joy that Abraytha had assured Xiantio that they could stay within the area of the ship, for there had in fact been a very good reason for his hesitation in answering the request. But it was also that selfsame, mutual caring that assuaged the brunt of it. He was certain that Xiantio *knew* that he would do all in his power to keep her from harm, and that she trusted that he knew what he was doing — and unlike past friendships, *their* relationship had nothing to fear from a mild dash of that old impulsive instinct which he proudly carried with him. There was nothing to worry about in the scrapyard, he was sure of that. And Xiantio would enjoy it as much as *he* had already begun to.

Xiantio, for her part, was waiting for the right time to voice her growing dislike of the gloomy place as she carefully picked her way around broken glass and shards of jagged metal. Great towers of scrap reaching up towards a non-existent sky lent the scrapyard an unsettlingly claustrophobic atmosphere despite its desolate vastness, and Xi stuck closely behind Abraytha as he jaunted lightly through the wastes, keeping her wary eyes on the shadows. Many times, as they'd trekked across the rubble, she thought she'd spotted something shifting in the distance — but it was only ever a falling bit of scrap, or a plume of drifting smog.

There was hardly likely to be anything lurking here among the discarded refuse, she reminded herself. Nothing but herself, Abraytha, and *Katioka*.

"You're *sure* this place is safe?" she asked again, as Abraytha leapt over a fallen refrigerator.

"Ha!" he replied, bristling as he clutched at the lapels of his gaudy coat. "Of *course* I am, Xi! Don't worry about a thing. I know what I'm doing."

She nodded, trying to put the nagging unrest out of her mind. As Abraytha bent to examine an old radio, Xiantio made to cast her gaze back upon the now-familiar and somewhat-comforting form of the ship as it rested atop the distant mound on which they had landed — and felt her hearts skip a beat.

Katioka was gone.

However claustrophobic the scrapyard had felt before, it was now tripled, and Xiantio suddenly found that she was desperate to leave. Which, it now seemed, might pose something of a problem. Turning to Abraytha, she gauged his reaction —— expecting outright despair.

Instead, he gave an awkward cough, then turned and clapped a hand onto Xiantio's shoulder.

"Chin up, dear friend!" he exclaimed. "I've lost her before, and always found her again eventually. I'm sure we'll come across her as we trek. And in the meantime…"

He turned, gesturing to the scrapyard before them.

"…well, I can think of few better places to be stranded!"

And with that not-altogether-heartening statement, Abraytha marched onward.

Xiantio blinked, then dashed to catch up with him.

"But — don't you want to *look* for *Katioka*?!"

"Of *course* I do!" he replied. "But the long way 'round works well enough, doesn't it? I've barely scratched the surface of this place!"

He began to walk again, but Xiantio moved into his path.

"But — I don't like it here." she admitted. "I'm sorry, but I really don't. This place gives me the heebie-jeebies, and not having *Katioka* makes it even worse — I'd rather just go as soon as we can."

She took a breath.

"Maybe this is normal for you, but — I'm scared."

Abraytha patted her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Xi!" he replied. "There's nothing to be scared of. Like I said, we'll come across *Katioka* sooner or later. Now, then — "

He began to walk forward again. Xiantio grabbed his elbow, holding him back.

"Wh —!" he exclaimed.

"Aren't you listening to me?" she asked, beginning to grow annoyed. "I'd like to look for *Katioka* now. Can we please, *please* do that?"

Abraytha crossed his arms, growing slightly piqued. *This* wasn't the mutually-caring friendship he so valued, he told himself.

"Now, look, Xi," he began, drawing himself up. "Good *Katioka* is *my* ship, and this is how I go about my business. We can't cut things short just because we've run into a little difficulty. Why, I once spent three weeks stranded in the 766747646474th Universe after *Katioka* was carried off by ghosts, but that didn't stop me searching for the fabled Ferryman's Lamp to replace her searchlights with! And — "

He trailed off, realising that he'd lost his train of thought, and that Xiantio didn't seem to be getting any less annoyed.

"The point is," he finished with a shrug, "such is the life of an Unbound Scavenger. It always *has* been."

Xiantio frowned.

"Why are you not more upset about this?" she asked. "You love *Katioka!*"

Abraytha paused, coughing awkwardly once more.

"Well," he began, "the thing is, Xi, I'd sort of expected that this might happen. I'd *heard* that the Scrapyard usually takes visitor's ships as collateral. Just until they reach the exit! How else can they stop people from making off with objects free of charge, in a place as vast as this? *Katioka* will be in perfectly safe hands until we get to the caretaker's hub. It won't be more than a few days!"

Xiantio took a step back, overcome with the unpleasant shock. Abraytha was her best friend, and they trusted each other — which meant that she had expected him to *tell* her this kind of thing, not to *lie* about it. And to *listen* to her when she told him that she wasn't enjoying a given location. And yet…

Anger boiling over, she jabbed a finger at his chest.

"You took me away from my home!" she snapped. "I *thought* I could trust you! Do you understand that?"

Abraytha drew himself up to an even greater extent, feeling a pang deep inside. What did she mean by *that?* Was his best friend implying that he was some kind of untrustworthy *kidnapper?* Had — had he been *wrong*, about this friendship being different?

"Took you away from your home?" he snapped defensively. "You *asked* to come with me! And if you don't *like* the way I do things, that's hardly *my* fault."

"No, the *point* is that I don't want to end up stuck somewhere *worse!* So I need you to —"

Abraytha felt another, deeper pang. Did Xiantio *not* truly trust that he would keep her from harm in situations like these, then? Did she, too, think him an irresponsible fool? Insecurities swirling, Abraytha turned away, crossing his arms.

"Well, fine," he said, interrupting her. "If that's how you feel, then *you* can go look for *Katioka* by yourself. Good luck. *I'm* staying right here."

Xiantio's stomach dropped as she took in his words, trying to cling to the image of the Abraytha she'd thought she knew, which had so suddenly been called into question. She'd been sure that he *did* care about her, no matter what. But — was he really going to abandon her so quickly, after such a brief spat?

She waited, but he had already started to move onwards through the scrap. Tears spilling from her eyes, she turned suddenly and dashed away, unsure what else to do but certain that Abraytha didn't want her there anymore.

Abraytha held his head high as he walked, sure that Xiantio would follow, a part of him desperately wanting to turn around and apologise at once — a part which was overruled by his wounded pride. *Xiantio* had insulted *him*, impugned his very character. He'd wait for *her* apology.

It didn't come. Turning back, he saw that Xiantio wasn't there. She was walking away, over the mounds of scrap. He felt a lump in his throat. She was really leaving. He hadn't thought —

Well, if she was really angry enough with him to leave, he thought, forcing himself to march away again — well, maybe he'd been wrong all along. Maybe she'd only ever cared about *Katioka* and a chance to travel away from her home. Not about *him*. His pride taking full control, he kept walking. She'd be fine.

Picking her way through the detritus, Xiantio felt tears running down her face. She hadn't thought he'd actually abandon her — she'd only been annoyed, that was all. She hadn't meant —

Well, if *that* was the kind of person Abraytha really was, she told herself, then she was better off.

Her self-reassurance didn't do much to allay her sadness, and she found herself sitting heavily by one of the piles of scrap. Drawing in her knees, she began to cry.

After a few moments, she heard a noise. An electronic crackle, and the sound of snapping metal appendages. Looking up, she saw a vivid red glow. Then something pierced her shoulder.

* * *

Abraytha touched down on the floor of the pit, folding his wings behind him. He was making a great effort to keep Xiantio out of his mind. It wasn't working.

He craned his head upwards, trying to keep back the tears by focusing on the rim of the pit into which he'd descended. The mounds of accumulated scrap had formed a depression here, revealing a few scattered patches of lifeless dirt lined with the occasional stretch of wires and pipes which trailed off to parts unknown. There were sure to be interesting, long-unseen treasures just lying around down here, he realised. Trying to enjoy himself, Abraytha took a step forward, and tripped over a spherical object lying directly in front of him.

Blinking, he pulled himself from the ground — then glanced back. The object in question rose to eye-height, and he recoiled at the sight of a crackling glass orb housing a living brain – hovering under its own power and aiming a blaster directly at his face.

"Ah," he said, taking a step back and holding his hands out in a placating gesture. "Hello."

The orb hung silently in the air, seeming almost to be staring back at him, despite its lack of any recognisable facial features. Then it flashed. Abraytha shielded his head and hoped for the best.

"Hm yes HELLO" crackled the orb in a buzzing electronic voice. "Very nice to MEET you."

Abraytha straightened up, momentarily pleased.

"Ah, hello!" he said, smoothing his checked coat. "I'm — "

"Archiball!" called a voice from behind, and Abraytha turned to see a humanoid figure emerging from behind some distant rubble. Crossing the distance with speed, they flicked a long tail in Abraytha's direction, obviously warning him off.

Taking in the new arrival from this closer vantage point, Abraytha could see that they were made up of what looked to be a hard, blue, crystalline substance, with red hair and a pair of mauve goggles over their eyes. He offered a tentative hand, but they were distracted — speaking with the orb.

"Who's this guy?" they asked, jerking a thumb in his direction.

"I do not know mistress NEETA." replied the orb. "But they do not seem to be HOSTILE."

"Indeed I am not," Abraytha put in. Taking a step forward, he offered his hand again. "Abraytha Janus Colefia, the Unbound Scavenger, son of the renowned Professor Yophese Colefia."

Continuing to ignore his proffered hand, the person — Neeta? — looked him up and down.

"Yeah? Well, nice to meet you, Abraham! But I'm afraid this is *my* claim, so…"

She gestured upwards with her tail, obviously inviting him to take his business elsewhere. Abraytha, insulted, stood his ground. "I'm *not* trying to steal your business, whatever it may be. *Nor* do I have any designs on your… orb?"

"I am an ORBULON," the orb helpfully replied, in its fluctuating modulated tones. "I was DAMAGED on the final day of the Great Multiversal CYBORG War. Shot down by a Detraxxis ARMADA during the final FIREFIGHT over the skies of the Cradle of the LESSER. I HURTLED through the unending VOID and landed in a desolate WASTE. NEETA offered me a JOB."

"Regardless!" he interrupted, tiring of the long explanation. "I'm just looking around, that's all!"

"You'd better look somewhere else!" Neeta cheerfully replied, removing a satchel from their shoulder and emptying its contents into a nearby handcart as she spoke. "I've got dibs on this whole area. Right, Archiball?"

"Right mistress," replied the orb, casually aiming his blaster at Abraytha's face.

With an indignant huff, Abraytha turned and began to stride away — pointedly *not* flying off out of the pit.

"We'll just have a look around the *other* side of this pit," he announced. "Won't we, Xi —"

He cut himself off.

Neeta's tail wrapped around his leg, spinning him around, and she laid an arm around his shoulders.

"Sorry, pal," she said, "But I can't have other scavengers hanging around my claim. 'specially not ones who'd attract as much attention as *you* do. No offence."

"Some taken," Abraytha assured the crystal-person, turning away. "This isn't *your* scrapyard, last I checked."

Bending down, he picked up an old toaster, holding it aloft to prove his point. Neeta glared — then grabbed it and tried to pull it from his hands. Abraytha, letting his lingering hurt feelings take control, pulled back, and the pair were soon engaged in a tugging match.

"Archiball!" Neeta called. "Get this guy outta here!"

Archiball began to buzz menacingly around Abraytha's head — Abraytha tried to swat it away with his wings — Neeta wrapped her tail around the toaster — and the next thing anyone knew, the duelling pair had toppled over, crashing hard into the wall of stacked scrap that made up one of the sides of the pit. They glared at each other for a moment.

"Now, look, pal —" Neeta began.

And then the wall of scrap rumbled.

The next thing Abraytha knew, it was very, very dark.

* * *

"Are you listening to me, Xiantio?"

Xiantio blinked, then started. Where was she? What had happened?

"Xiantio?" asked Ruthquigwalle, peering down at her over his spectacles. "Is everything alright?"

Oh. Oh, yes, of course. She was in the Cathedral of Winter, receiving another lesson from her Archon master. Where *else* would she have been? The thought hung strangely in Xiantio's mind for a moment, but she brushed it aside.

"Yes, Master Ruthquigwalle." she replied, nodding to the old Winterian as she sat back down at his table.

Everything was cold, here. Endlessly, disappointingly cold. Outside the nearest window, the snow was swirling as it always did — all-consuming, and all-covering, carrying with it a strange air of melancholy that she couldn't quite place. Almost as if… as if something deep within her hearts — all five of them — longed to see the spring, to see whatever lay *beneath* the snow, or past the storm's end. But that was impossible for an Archon of Winter — she knew *that* well enough.

"Sorry," she continued. "I was… distracted."

The elder Archon frowned.

"You must pay *attention*, my young apprentice!" he scolded lightly. "I was just coming to a very important point indeed."

Xiantio tried to focus as the Archon reached into his pocket, producing an object which she recognised as one of the adhesive coats which were common among their people. She'd brought one aboard *Katioka*…

Xiantio blinked. She blinked again. The stuck thought didn't dislodge itself.

"Are you paying attention, Xiantio?" Ruthquigwalle asked. He laid the coat on the table, drawing her attention back to it. "Now, answer me truly, my young apprentice — *what is this?*"

Xiantio twitched her ears in confusion.

"Well — it's a —"

Suddenly, the door burst open. Xiantio looked up to see Abraytha Janus Colefia standing in the doorway, silhouetted against swirling snow, a rare winter's sun seeming to cast its rays about him and draw her from the unending chill of winter.

"Xiantio!" he called. "Take my hand!"

Her heart soaring at the sight of her best friend, Xiantio leapt across the room, meeting his grasp.

"Xiantio!" called Master Ruthquigwalle, his voice cracking oddly. "Come back! Tell me what this is!"

Clinging to Abraytha's hand, Xiantio soared through the sky, the snow racing past them like a field of blurring stars. She laughed as they swooped over frozen lakes and snow-dusted forests, twirling playfully around each other, higher and higher until they danced among the clouds themselves. Then past them, and into the cosmos beyond.

She stared into Abraytha's eyes; he was laughing as hard as she was. She never wanted it to end.

Suddenly, a darkness came over Abraytha's features, and the air turned grey and biting. Xiantio, scared, clutched tighter at Abraytha's hand, but there was no comfort to be found there.

"You can look for *Katioka* by yourself." he told her. "I'm staying right here."

"I can't fly without you." she said. "I'll fall."

Abraytha turned away. He opened his hand, and she felt herself tumbling back down towards the freezing ground below.

* * *

"This is your fault, pal."

Rubbing at his head, Abraytha sat up, clunking his horns against a low ceiling of scrap.

Ah. Right.

Neeta's crystal skin was shining in the flickering glow of Archiball's crackling electrical pulses, so that Abraytha could see her intensely annoyed expression very clearly before him. He frowned.

"You're lucky you didn't get crushed," she continued.

"We're *all* lucky, I should think," Abraytha grumbled, brushing metallic dust from his coat.

"Nah," Neeta replied, sitting back on their haunches. She patted her arm, producing a low clinking sound. "I'd've been fine."

Turning away, she held a finger to the side of her glowing mauve goggles, scanning the vicinity.

"Hmm… mostly large, loose artefacts. That's good. Archiball! Prime your blaster!"

The orb was silent, unmoving from its place on the ground. Frowning, Neeta tapped it lightly with their shoe.

"Hey — Archiball? You with me, pal?"

The orb crackled, sending sparks flying, then unleashed a burst of static.

"You took me away from my home!" came Xiantio's voice, blaring out of the tinny speakers.

Abraytha recoiled.

"I thought I could trust you!"

Their frown growing deeper, Neeta knelt to examine her companion.

"Xext, xext, xext — he must have been hit by something…" she fussed, before holding her hand to her goggles once more. "Oh, thank kron — no damage to the brain. Just a fault in the connection to the cybernetics."

She leaned in.

"Can you hear me, Archiball? Don't worry, pal — I'll get you fixed up just as soon as we're out of here."

"You took me away from my home!"

"Wh — what's it saying?" Abraytha asked, his voice wobbling slightly.

"I had him set to process all the noise in the vicinity. You know, look-out duty. This must be something he picked up earlier."

Crawling through the cave, Neeta began to feel at the walls, eventually stopping at a loose section.

"Alright! Guess there's nothing to do but start shifting scrap. Lend a hand, Horns."

Scrambling as far as he could from the orb, Abraytha began to tug at the wall of scrap, making as much noise as he could.

* * *

Abraytha gestured to his private collection with characteristic pride, indicating each item with a flourish of his hand.

"Do you remember what *these* are, Xiantio?"

"That's not important right now," Xiantio pleaded, shaking her head. "Abraytha — please, I just want to talk."

Abraytha let loose a chuckle.

"Why, dear friend — we *are* talking! And what better subject to focus our conversation upon? What *are* these things, Xi?"

"I don't care! I care about *you*, Abraytha! You've been acting so weird all day — please, *please* just tell me what's wrong!"

Abraytha paced the floorboards of *Katioka*, shaking his head with displeasure.

"Oh, dear, oh, *dear*, Xi."

He turned to face her, a strange edge in his voice.

"If you can't even tell me what these things are — such a simple question! — maybe you're not *fit* to travel by my side."

Abraytha reached for one of the ship's controls.

"No," Xiantio begged, moving to stop him. "No, please! Abraytha, I — !"

He pulled the lever, and the ship tilted, sending Xiantio falling through the doors and off the side of the deck. Hurtling through the Void, she kept her eyes on Abraytha, standing there on the deck, watching her coldly, growing smaller and smaller as she fell away into the darkness.

* * *

Neeta sat with a sigh, brushing dust from their hair.

"Whew!" she huffed. "Alright! Let's rest for a second."

Abraytha glanced at the tiny dent which they had made in the wall of scrap that surrounded them, and sighed.

"I thought I could trust you!"

"*Kron*, that's annoying." Neeta said, shaking their head. Reaching into her satchel, she drew out a flask and took a sip. "Want some? Interstitial rum."

"You're offering?" Abraytha asked, somewhat spikily. He turned further away from Archiball, facing the wall. "I thought you didn't like me."

"Hey, nothin' personal!" she replied. "Just gotta protect my claim. Scavenger's life, you know how it goes."

Abraytha didn't respond.

"…You *do* know how things work around here, don't you?" she asked. "I mean, I know this *used* to be a functioning scrapyard, but nowadays, it's everyone for themselves. If you've got a claim staked out, you've gotta defend it."

"Oh." Abraytha replied. "…*Used* to be?"

Neeta shook their head.

"I thought you said you were the Ultimate Scavenger or something. How can you not *know* this stuff?"

"*Unbound*," Abraytha corrected. "And… I'm freelance, so to speak. I've never actually had a chance to *visit* the Scrapyard before."

Neeta made a noise which might have been a laugh.

"And I suppose *you're* an expert," he huffed, clutching at his lapels.

"Ya might say so!" they chirped. "Oh, I've been *all* around. Worked with every scavenger who's anybody. The Queen of the Black Market, Harvox Von Crumm, the Salvaged Sovereign, the Partnership of the Stockpiling Packrats, buncha Jenny Everywheres… there was that one guy who used to hang around Vega with a clockwork, but after that whole business with the Caradans and the whatsits, he got —"

She cut herself off with a short cough.

"Er, sorry. I'm rambling."

She took another drink from the flask.

"'course, I'm not too sure those were all *this* version of me…" she mused, blinking. "Ergh. Rum's got me phasing a little."

She stretched out, as much as could be done within the cramped space.

"Good to have partners-in-crime," she continued, casting Abraytha a look. "You're, uh — not actually all *alone* out here, I hope? Because, take it from me, pal — that's a death-wish."

Abraytha closed his eyes.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, *that's* not an encouraging response."

He crossed his arms.

"I *had* a friend," he replied, wounded. "A *best* friend. But she made it very clear that she didn't feel the same way."

"You took me away from my home!"

Abraytha winced, wishing he could curl up inside of himself and disappear.

Neeta nodded.

"Uh-huh. I *see*…"

She tapped idly at her knee, producing a clinking sound.

"Well, look, out here, it can be dangerous to let hurt feelings get in the way of friendship, you know?"

"I — I don't think it was just hurt feelings," Abraytha said. "On either of our parts."

"I thought I could trust you!"

Neeta glanced at the orb, then turned back to Abraytha with a raised eyebrow.

"And — does *that* have anything to do with it?"

"It isn't how it sounds," he huffed. Feeling tears welling again in his eyes, he hastened to unburden himself of the thoughts that had been gnawing at his mind. "She *wanted* to come with me. We were going to travel together. But she didn't trust me anymore than anyone *else* ever does. Not enough to think that I'd keep her safe. Not enough to think I'm not some kind of reckless, careless kidnapper…!"

Abraytha trailed off, rubbing his eyes. Neeta nodded, evidently suspicious.

"You took me away from my home!"

"Uh-huh. And — did you give her any *reason* to think these things? Or… to *not* think them?"

Abraytha sat up, affronted.

"Oh, you too, then?" he spat. "Ha! Yes, yes! Doesn't surprise me a bit!"

He turned away.

"Never changes, does it? People hear the name Abraytha Janus Colefia, and they think of the bloody Bogeyman!"

Neeta rolled her eyes.

"Just seems to me that going away to travel with someone is a pretty big leap of trust *already*," she replied. "And that you're — no offence meant — a prideful old fool too set in his ways to notice when you've given someone a pretty good *reason* to be annoyed with you. Orb-smasher."

"I thought I could trust you!"

"Oh, let's just not speak," Abraytha huffed. "The quicker we get to sleep, the quicker we can part ways."

"Works for me," Neeta replied, putting away her flask. "'night, Archiball."

Abraytha lay down on the cold ground, staring at the wall of scrap as his mind insistently refused to believe any of his justifications.

"You took me away from my home!"

* * *

Katioka stopped with a clunk.

Outside, all was darkness. Xiantio looked out through a porthole into the gloom, and she was afraid.

As quietly as she could manage, she crept across the creaking planks, tiptoeing past the looming forms of Abraytha's collection, which seemed unduly eerie in the dark. There was a light coming from the stern, and Xiantio followed it, feeling her hearts pounding in her chest.

She peered through the adjoining door, which was ajar, and looked out onto the stern. Abraytha was crouched there, cloaked in shadow, staring up at a strange circle of light which seemed to hang in the void above. The endless silent darkness sparked in Xiantio a growing dread — but for some reason, the light scared her even more.

There was a clunk, and Xiantio stepped back, realising that something had fallen from the glowing circle — a technological object much like those

which populated Abraytha's collection. Silently, Abraytha laid his hands upon it, raising it slowly to his face.

"Abraytha?" she whispered. There was no reply. "Abraytha! I don't like this. Can we get out of here?"

Slowly, very slowly, he turned his head to face her.

"Why would we ever want to do that?" he asked, in a flat voice. "I sailed us here on purpose. Look, Xiantio. Isn't this fascinating? As long as we stay here, new and wonderful things will continue to drop from the void. We don't have to go anywhere, anymore."

There was another clunk, and another object landed on the deck. Abraytha lifted it, raising it slowly to the light.

"What is it, Xiantio?" he asked, insistent despite his monotony. "What is it?"

Xiantio took another step back, studying his shadowed form.

"…You're not Abraytha."

Abraytha stood, turning towards her.

"This is how I do things, Xiantio," he replied. He paused, then looked up into the light. "If you don't like it — then maybe you should go."

He raised a hand, pointing to the glowing circle. Xiantio took a breath, filled with a sudden certainty. Memories of happy times with Abraytha flashed through her mind, and she knew — despite his flaws — that this wasn't the true sum of the person she'd decided to journey with.

"You're not Abraytha."

"Of course I am, Xiantio," said Abraytha with a crackle, splitting in two as *Katioka* reflected itself down the middle.

The left-Abraytha put a hand on her shoulder, and the right approached from behind.

"Abraytha is exactly this way," he said.

"No, he's not."

The two Abraythae cocked their heads, confused.

"Of course he is," they crackled. "We have seen it."

Xiantio shook her head.

"I want to see the real Abraytha." she demanded.

"We have done as you want."

The Abraythae continued to multiply.

"He is exactly this way." they insisted. "We have seen it. We have seen it in your head."

The Abraythae took Xiantio by the arms and, with a flap of their wings, tossed her up into the circle of light.

* * *

Abraytha wrapped his arms around his head, trying to sleep. On the other side of the small space, Neeta was already napping — but Archiball was taking no such rest.

"You took me away from my home!"

Abraytha turned, trying to block out the sound.

"I thought I could trust you!"

Abraytha sat up, drawing himself back into a corner of the collapsed pit and fixing his gaze upon the small pool of light cast by the orb.

"You *wanted* to come with me!" he declared, smoothing his coat. "Because we were friends. That was what I *thought."*

"You took me away from my home!"

"But as soon as things got rough, you left me! It — it isn't fair. I thought I'd finally —"

"I thought I could trust you!"

"Didn't I mean more than that to you?"

"You took me away from my home!"

"Shut up! Shut up and leave me alone!"

"I thought I could trust you!"

"I — I should never have told you to —"

"You took me away from my home!"

"But — but then… I *did* tell you to, didn't I?"

"I thought I could trust you!"

"I didn't mean it! You ought to have *known* I didn't mean it! I —"

"You took me away from my home!"

"Oh, why *should* you have known? We've only known each other a short while! And — and maybe I *did* mean it, just for a moment. I *said* it, anyway. How can I be mad at you for taking me at my word?"

"I thought I could trust you!"

"You — you took me at my word. Trusted me enough to come away in *Katioka*, trusted that we could stay by the ship. Even trusted that I —"

"You took me away from my home!"

"— that I *wanted* you to go!"

"I thought I could trust you!"

"And I betrayed that trust. Lied to you, and then abandoned you, and expected you to trust me enough not to care. Oh, Xiantio —"

"You took me away from my home!"

"Oh, Xiantio, I'm sorry, I'm *so* sorry! I wanted it to be *different* with you."

"I thought I could trust you!"

"What a ridiculous old fool I've been. Neeta! Help me shift this!"

Neeta stirred from their slumber to find Abraytha pulling a bulky kitchen appliance out of the mound of scrap, sending the rubble rumbling around them.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked, groggy.

"I need to find my best friend!" he plaintively pronounced, beating his wings as he pulled the appliance out of place.

Sending her tail lashing towards him, she cracked him in the arm like a whip, and he fell back, landing on the ground.

"Are you crazy, hornhead?" she asked. "We've gotta be *careful* about this! If you make that much noise, you'll attract the bots!"

Abraytha blinked.

Neeta stared back at him, aghast.

"Oh, *please* tell me you know about the *bots."*

* * *

Xiantio could see them all, strung out along a wire like insects caught in flypaper, hanging at strange angles and stretching onwards past the distant horizon. Their minds were burning.

"INCORPORATION ERROR," droned the all-encompassing voice. "MODULE REJECTING CONNECTION."

She could feel herself slipping back in, but hung on, catching flashes of something deeper and more real every time she strained against the hellscape. The other minds were screaming, which meant that she was, too — but she resisted the urge to slip away into the darkness.

Pictures of objects of all kinds ran through her mind at lightning speed, accompanied by one endlessly repeated question.

"Come back, Xiantio," came Abraytha's voice. "Tell me what this is. Tell me what this is. Tell me what this is or I'll leave you here forever."

She had one certainty, one truth on which to hang. That wasn't Abraytha. In spite of everything, she *trusted* Abraytha. No matter that every inch of her brain was insisting otherwise — the voice in her mind was *not* Abraytha.

"Tell me what this is. Tell me what this is. Tell me what this is. Tell me — "

The voice was ceaseless. Xiantio held on.

* * *

"Alright! How're ya feeling, Archie?"

"Much BETTER mistress Neeta thank you."

Stowing her wrench, Neeta stood, stretching her lattices.

"That's a relief."

She cast a glance towards the horizon, then sighed.

"Okay," she continued. "Let's catch up with him."

High above, Abraytha was soaring over the towering scrap, guilt and panic propelling him ever faster onward. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he called his best friend's name over and over again, listening to it echo across the desolate metal wastes.

There was no response.

He flew faster.

The Interdimensional Scrapyard, Neeta had explained, had been a functioning operation once — a bustling hub for interdimensional salvage, frequented by travellers from countless worlds and kept running smoothly by a legion of custom-built robots. Aeons ago, they had been set into motion by the Scrapyard's founders — and ever since then, they had carefully scanned, identified, and catalogued each item of scrap brought into the pocket-realm — whether by its roving scrap-ships or by bartering traders. Each new item's details were added to the network they shared, and the robots stood ready to assist any visitor in finding what they needed via an instant search of the system.

But the process of scrap identification was slow, requiring hours upon hours of searches through the internets and radio waves and television signals of thousands of universes. And eventually — foolishly — one of the Scrapyard's maintenance technicians had tried to rectify this. Surely, they'd thought, there *must* be a better system for identification than the one with which the robots had originally been programmed. The technicians had never hit upon one — but the robots, with all of their processing power, could surely dedicate a portion of their memory to devising a solution to their own problem and eventually find a better method.

Happy with this idea, the hapless technician in question had designed the new directive and launched the update to all of the Scrapyard's bots. That, of course, was when everything had fallen apart.

The nameless technician had never undergone any disciplinary process for their actions. It would have been difficult to dole out any punishment, given that they were among the first of many, many people whom the robots, operating under the new prime directive of 'find a more efficient method of identifying scrap at any cost', had incorporated into their network as a component of a vast living computer able to instantly recognise any object which resided within its collective memory.

The Scrapyard had become much less popular, after that. The ever-present chance of being kidnapped by crazed machines and permanently plugged into a supercomputer tended to turn away the discerning trader.

Abraytha was, as he soared over the mounds of scrap, currently one of the only exceptions to this rule of thumb. Cursing himself for blundering into the Scrapyard without knowing any of this fairly crucial information, and even more so for the ever-growing indications that Xiantio had been *right* to doubt him, he kept his eyes peeled for any sign of the bots — certain, now, that his missing best friend had fallen into their clutches, and willing to give himself up for incorporation into the network if it meant gaining a chance to free her.

Swooping low past another mound, he spotted one. The dark shape was patrolling a distant stretch of scrap, its red lens glowing, tendrils writhing around it. Abraytha took a steadying breath — then started towards it.

Something hit him, and he crashed to the ground, tumbling through bits of metal before coming to a sudden stop in front of an old refrigerator. A strong hand grabbed him by the collar, jerking him upwards, and he winced, preparing for the worst — only to find himself face to face with Neeta.

"Wh —!" he sputtered, baffled. "Did you knock me out of the sky?"

"Nah," Neeta replied, jerking a thumb at the orb hovering by their head. "*He* did."

"Why!?"

"What do you think you're going to accomplish getting grabbed by the bots?" she asked, incredulous. "If you wanna help your friend, there's better ways to do it than *that!*"

Abraytha bristled, about to snap at them for daring to question his selfless and heroic actions — then paused. Then sighed.

"Alright, alright," he replied, feeling a frantic need to get to Xiantio before it was too late. "What do *you* suggest, then?"

Neeta smiled.

"Archiball?"

There was a whirring sound — then the transparent casing of the orb was covered over by a spherical holographic projection displaying what looked to be a map of a complex industrial installation.

"Archiball took full scans of the area when we first got here," Neeta explained, tapping on the casing. "See those static lifesigns? This is where the bots keep their victims. The central server. And —"

Archiball's map zoomed out, displaying a wider area. Abraytha could see a green arrow — presumably indicating Archiball's position on the map — located just a short distance away from the server complex.

"It's nearby!" he exclaimed, nearly taking flight again in his urgency. Neeta grabbed him by the arm, pulling him back to the ground.

"Keep your head on for a second, professor's-boy!"

"But she's just over there!" Abraytha said, panicked. "What do you *suggest?* I've got to *try!*"

"Yeah, yeah!" Neeta exclaimed. "But you could do with some *help.* Maybe… a distraction?"

Abraytha frowned.

"You mean… you'd *help* me? Why?"

Neeta shrugged, striding past him.

"Good karma," she airily replied. "Also, I want you out of my hair. Come on!"

Taking a deep breath, Abraytha followed.

* * *

The tangible world was so close now. So close… if she could just stretch a little more, push her mind out a bit farther, strain past the wires and protocols holding her in place, tune out the voice, the signals, the screaming…

"INCORPORATION ERROR. MODULE REJECTING CONNECTION."

Thoughts that weren't her own were racing through her mind, intruding upon her memories like invading viruses, beating back against her mental antibodies, trying to colonise her subconscious — but if she could… just… reach… a little… bit… further…

Exhausted, Xiantio felt herself slump back, the tiny amount of static that had cleared from her mind rushing back into place as her conscious thoughts teetered on the edge of darkness. She could feel herself slipping back in. The foul tendrils of the nightmare worlds coiled outwards from the depths of her brain, a horrible aura of sense-impressions indicating something awful, sending her heart racing and tears into her eyes, but if she could just keep herself from thinking about it, maybe she wouldn't be dragged back in… she couldn't go back in… she couldn't… go… back…

"Xiantio!" came the voice from her mind. "Tell me what this is! Tell me what this is! I *am* Abraytha. I am! I am your friend. You would tell your friend Abraytha what something is. That is true. I can see that that is true. This is just the way Abraytha acts. I can see it in your mind. You must tell Abraytha! You must tell me!"

No… no… that wasn't Abraytha… that isn't Abraytha… can't think about it… don't think about it… but… isn't it Abraytha? Says it's Abraytha. He's Abraytha. Must be Abraytha. Must… resist… tell Abraytha what it… isn't Abraytha… is… Abraytha!

"Xiantio!"

With a rush of vertigo, Xiantio felt her mind flying upwards from the depths of the nightmare-worlds — towards the sound of the voice which had come from without. It was Abraytha. The voice in her head hadn't a hope of keeping up its illusions in his presence.

The next thing she knew, something was pulling on her, and for the first time in what seemed like a very long while, she was once again aware of her physical form. Something jolted in her mind, and she could suddenly see out of her real eyes — see a tangle of wires and circuitry and vacuum tubes and twitching skeletons, although all of it was, for the moment, extremely blurry. Her head was full of cotton and her stomach was full of nausea, and she could feel herself beginning to fall to the ground — but felt the embrace of Abraytha before her instead, and suddenly felt much, much better.

There was a shock of pain as the connecting-tendrils were pulled from her skin — and then Abraytha was holding her, setting her gently on the ground, stroking her hair with great concern.

"Oh, Xiantio!" she heard him say. "I'm so sorry! I'll never —"

She fell into a contented, exhausted sleep.

* * *

Xiantio's eyes snapped open at the sound of an explosion. Briefly panicked, she looked up at the gloomy sky of the Scrapyard, only to see one of the horrible bots crackle with a veil of electricity before crashing to the

ground and exploding — joining what seemed to be a pile of remnants of other bots as some kind of… brain in an orb, also crackling with electricity but seeming much more pleased about it, zipped through the sky in triumphant circles.

As she watched, another robot rose behind the orb, reaching out with one of its writhing tendrils to grab its apparent assailant — only to seize up like its fellow before it and land atop its remains.

"Nice one, Archiball!" cheered an unfamiliar voice. "I think that's all of them! You can de-electrify now."

The electricity vanished from the orb as it descended from the sky — and, following its path, Xiantio saw it join a person made of blue crystal and… Abraytha.

She pulled herself to her feet, but he had already rushed to her, a look of great concern upon his face.

"Xiantio, are you alright? Oh, I *am* sorry!"

Xiantio began to cough, then, swallowing, worked up the energy to speak.

"...Can I have some water?"

"*One* sip," said the crystal person, narrowing their eyes as they handed over a thermos.

As Xiantio took as large a sip as she felt she could justify, Neeta patted Abraytha on the shoulder.

"Well, I think this where we part ways, hornhead!" they announced. "Archiball and I never had good enough reason to risk taking on the bots before, but now that we've taken a few of 'em out, this patch of the Scrapyard should be a little safer. Might establish a new claim right around here. This is where the bots took some of their choicest prizes for cataloguing, you know. Good pickings."

She crossed her arms.

"So get outta here. Seriously."

A thought occurred to Xiantio, and she cast her eyes around her — then grinned with relief. The bots had deposited *Katioka* on the mound behind her. It stood proudly on the peak, its sails rustling in the hot breeze of the server complex — as beautiful as it had ever been.

"And remember what I said!" Neeta called to Abraytha, taking the thermos back from Xiantio as she began to stride towards the server complex, looking over the scenery with a covetous eye. "Hurt feelings, prideful old fool, etcetera. Come on, Archiball!"

"Yes mistress."

Abraytha stood in silence for a moment, clearly working up the courage to say something — then smoothed his coat and turned to face Xiantio.

"You shouldn't trust me," he said. "Not until I've earned it. And from now on, I'm *going* to. I promise."

Xiantio smiled, then took his hand. Everyone had flaws. Abraytha certainly did. But they weren't *all* he was, and beneath it all, what he *really* was was the person she'd wanted more than anything to travel with, and still absolutely did.

"I know," she said. "I trust you."

Hand-in-hand, they started for *Katioka*.